



Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General

Healthcare Inspection Operating Room Nurses Scope of Practice Issues Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital Hines, Illinois

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Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of Inspector General
Washington, DC 20420

TO: Director, Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital (578/00)

SUBJECT: Healthcare Inspection - Operating Room Nurses Scope of Practice Issues, Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital, Hines, Illinois

1. Purpose

The Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General (OIG) Office of Healthcare Inspections (OHI) reviewed allegations reported to the Hotline Section that operating room (OR) nurses at the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital (Hines VA Hospital) were performing duties normally assigned to physicians. The purpose of this inspection was to determine the validity of these allegations.

2. Background

The Hines VA Hospital provides primary, extended, and specialty care and serves as a tertiary care referral center for all VA facilities in Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 12. The hospital currently operates 472 beds, and primary care is provided at community-based outpatient clinics in Oak Park, Manteno, Elgin, Oak Lawn, Aurora, LaSalle, and Joliet, Illinois.

On June 7, 2005, an anonymous complainant contacted the OIG's Hotline Division and reported that nurses at the Hines VA Hospital were being asked to perform duties that are normally assigned to physicians. The complainant alleged that nurses were being asked to hold retractors, cut bones with a saw, suture wounds, and cut sutures.

3. Scope and Methodology

In response to the allegation, we visited the Hines VA Hospital and a university affiliated with the hospital on multiple occasions between July and October 2005. We conducted interviews with service chiefs, managers, and staff nurses assigned to the OR. We reviewed the criteria used to certify a first assistant¹ and hospital policies and procedures. We also reviewed staffs' functional statements, specialized certifications, staff meeting minutes, surgery schedules, and certified time schedules for the 1st and 2nd quarters of Fiscal Year 2005. Although VA nurses may hold registered nurse licensure in any state, as a point of reference we contacted the Illinois Department of Professional Regulation to verify a registered nurse's scope of practice in the State of Illinois.

We conducted the review in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Inspections* published by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency. www.ignet.gov

4. Inspection Results

Issue 1: OR Nurses Functioning in the Role of First Assistant

We did not substantiate the allegation that OR nurses were functioning in the role of first assistant.

We interviewed the nurse team leaders of Orthopedic Surgery and Neurosurgery and 13 OR staff nurses. Both nurse team leaders denied that OR staff nurses had ever complained of being requested by a surgeon to cut bones with a saw or suture wounds. Six of the 13 OR staff nurses interviewed stated that they had been asked to hold retractors, but had not been asked to position them. Seven of the 13 OR staff nurses stated they had been asked to cut suture² (the material from the needle after stitches were completed by surgeon) and had done so. All 13 nurses denied being requested by a physician to cut bones with a saw, suture wounds, or position and apply tension to retractors.

It was acknowledged during our interviews with the OR Clinical Nurse Manager (CNM) and the Surgery Line Program Nurse Manager, that it was an acceptable practice for the OR staff nurse to be asked to cut suture during a surgery case. It was also acknowledged that nurses can momentarily hold retractors once the placement and tension has been applied by the physician. However, suturing wounds, positioning retractors, and cutting bones with a saw are all outside the scope of practice for an OR staff nurse.

¹ A specially trained clinician who assists with retracting, sponging, suturing, cauterizing bleeders, and closing and treating wounds. <http://stats.bls.gov/oco/ocos106.htm>

² A material used in closing a surgical wound. (Dorland's Medical Dictionary)

During an interview, the Chief of Neurosurgery denied having knowledge of any OR staff nurses functioning in the role of first assistant. The Chief of Neurosurgery told us that OR staff nurses have been asked to hold retractors briefly once they are positioned by the surgeon. The Chief of Neurosurgery was not aware of any complaints that resident surgeons had requested OR nurses to perform duties usually assigned to first assistants.

We interviewed the Chief of Orthopedic Surgery, who told us that on some occasions nurses are asked to cut suture. The Chief of Orthopedic Surgery had no knowledge of any OR nurses cutting bones with a saw, cutting tissue, or suturing wounds. The Chief of Orthopedic Surgery was unaware of any incidents regarding resident surgeons requesting OR staff nurses to perform these skills.

According to the State of Illinois Nurse Practice Act, it is acceptable practice for the scrub nurse to cut suture and momentarily hold retractors that have been positioned by the surgeon during the case. However, it is unacceptable for nurses to independently, or by request of the surgeon, position retractors, suture wounds (without specialized training and certification), or cut bones with a saw.

Issue 2: Documentation of Competence for OR Nurses

During the course of this inspection, we reviewed documents regarding the scope of practice for OR nurses. The hospital's list of competencies for an OR nurse includes numerous activities such as infection control, preoperative documentation, principles of aseptic³ technique, environmental control, and gowning. However, they did not address the ability of an OR nurse to cut suture or hold retractors after they were positioned by a surgeon. They also do not contain general language that would encompass activities within the scope of practice of an OR nurse but not specifically included in the hospital's list of competencies.

5. Conclusion

We did not substantiate the allegation that OR nurses functioned in the role of first assistant at Hines VA Hospital. However, we did find that the hospital's competency verifications do not address the particular duties described in the allegation which are appropriately within the practice for an OR nurse.

6. Recommendation

We recommend that the Hospital Director ensure either that the documentation of competence for OR nurses includes cutting suture and holding retractors or includes general language of competence that would encompass all duties performed routinely within the scope of practice for an OR nurse.

³ Free from infection or septic material; sterile. (*Dorland's Medical Dictionary*)

7. Hospital Director Comments

The Hospital Director concurred with the results of this inspection.

8. Assistant Inspector General for Healthcare Inspections Comments

The Hospital Director concurred with the findings and recommendations and provided an acceptable improvement plan. We will follow up on planned actions until they are completed.

(original signed by:)

JOHN D. DAIGH, JR., M.D.
Assistant Inspector General
for Healthcare Inspections

Hospital Director Comments

**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

Memorandum

Date: January 12, 2006

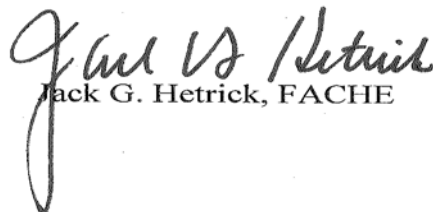
From: Hospital Director

Subject: **Operating Room Nurses Scope of Practice Issues**

To: Director, Chicago Regional Office of Healthcare Inspections

THRU: Director, Veterans Integrated Services Network
(10N12)

1. In response to the OIG report, enclosed find the attached action plan. I concur with the findings in the report.
2. If you have any questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact Lynn K. Hoffstadter, PI Manager, at 708-202-5609.


Jack G. Hetrick, FACHE

**Director's Comments
to Office of Inspector General's Report**

The following Director's comments are submitted in response to the recommendation in the Office of Inspector General's Report:

OIG Recommendation

Recommended Improvement Action We recommend that the Hospital Director ensure either that the documentation of competence for OR nurses, includes cutting sutures and holding retractors or includes general language of competence that would encompass all duties performed routinely within the scope of practice for an OR nurse.

Concur

Target Completion Date: 2/24/2006

The competency assessment documentation form for OR nurses has been revised to include general language of competence in performing OR duties, to include holding retractors and cutting sutures under the supervision of the surgeon (see attachment [Multiple documents, representing many OR nurse specialties for different types of surgery, are on file with the OIG.].) Certification of these competencies will be completed for all OR nurses by the end of February 2006. These two additional items have been added to the competency checklist for new OR nurses (see attachment [Multiple documents, representing many OR nurse specialties for different types of surgery, are on file with the OIG.].)

OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

OIG Contact	Verena Briley-Hudson, MN, RN, Director Chicago Office of Healthcare Inspections (708) 202-2672
Acknowledgments	Andrea Buck, MD Wachita Haywood, RN Jennifer Reed, RN George Wesley, MD

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